DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 095 123 SP 008 300

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TITLE Teacher Power and American Education.
PUB DATE 18 Jul 74
NOTE 15p.; Speech prepared for the Annual Harvard Summer School Conference on Educational Administration (45th, Cambridge, Massachusetts, July 18, 1974)
AVAILABLE FROM Coalition of American Public Employees, 1126 Sixteenth Street, N. W., Suite 213, Washington, D. C. 20036 (no price quoted)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Collective Bargaining; *Educational Innovation; *Political Power; *Teacher Behavior

ABSTRACT

This paper advocates the use of political power and collective bargaining by teachers to improve public education. The following are listed as reasons why collective bargaining has not been very successful: (a) collective bargaining was not designed to accommodate the needs and commitment of professional employees; (b) there is no national policy regarding education; (c) negotiators are too inexperienced or incompetent to deal with anything other than bread-and-butter issues; (d) boards of education and administrations refuse to consider noneconomic items; and (e) the preoccupation of bargaining agents with job security and other threshold items has discouraged innovation at the bargaining table. The author states that the collective bargaining system can be adopted as a vehicle for improving the quality of education, which lies in reordering national priorities through political action. (PD)

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TEACHER POWER and AMERICAN EDUCATION

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"Can the collective bargaining process be adapted as a vehicle for improving the quality of education? Will Portia be able to face life in a new city? I think the answer is yes."

Teacher Power and American Education is an edited transcript of Mr. Flynn's speech on July 18 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the Forty-fifth Annual Harvard Summer School Conference on Educational Administration.

TEACHER POWER? I wish we had it.

In view of the fact that the American public and professional educators have grabbed about every other brass ring that's come around in order to try to improve public education in America, I would be perfectly happy to see teacher power given a shot at it. Americans have sought the educational millenium in technology, educational parks, differentiated staffing, new curricula, vouchers, and accountability. We've even talked about turning the schools over to the students. The only thing we've never truly considered is giving power to the teachers.

Teachers are looking to the collective bargaining process as one way of acquiring power. Power--not simply over the traditional "wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment" enunciated in the National Labor Relations Act, but power to effect educational change. On this point, Helen Wise, past president of NEA, has spoken plainly and forthrightly, as in her recent testimony before the House Subcommittee on Labor:

> "... teachers seek to participate in decision-making with respect to teaching methods,

curriculum content, educational facilities, and other matters designed to change the nature or improve the quality of the educational service being given to the children." [1]

Needless to say—needless because by now we've all learned the lessons in the headlines from Baltimore, San Francisco, and New York City—the degree of participation, and with whom, are negotiable issues.

Teachers are not alone among public employees who have come to look to collective bargaining as a means of taking care of their professional concerns as well as bread-and-butter needs. With reference to hospital and health services, the vice president of personnel at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York has said, reflecting a not surprising management bias:

> "The single 'most important and most unrealistic factor' relating to collective bargaining is that the issue is no longer money for the employees but rather control over the delivery of medical care. . ." [2]

In a lighter vein, Arnold Weber, provost of Carnegie-Mellon University and former guru of the Cost of Living Council predicts that ". . . social workers will view collective bargaining as a vehicle for genteel revolution." [3]

Attempts to negotiate educational improvements through collective bargaining have been few, and in the main, not too rewarding. Usually, when negotiators confront educational issues, they cop-out by inserting in the contract a provision calling for the establishment of a joint committee on this, or a joint committee on that. Typically, and predictably, these efforts amount to nothing.

The reasons are many and interrelated. First is the heavy reliance on the limited interpretation of scope of bargaining as it has evolved in the private sector under the NLRA, with its emphasis on management's right to manage an enterprise and labor's right to demand a fair share of the profits and some degree of physical safety and job security. For all that this is changing, and a revolution is taking place in work expectation in the private sector (note the wildcat strike of GM's Lordstown plant), this traditional apportionment of roles between management and labor still holds: the system had not been designed to accommodate the needs and commitment of professional employees.

A second reason for this failure to exploit the potential of the collective bargaining process for more than bread-and-butter issues—and I speak of a failure on the part of both administration and teachers—can be traced directly to the fact that we have no national policy. We have no federal statute, no federal guidelines, no commonly accepted statement of standards, of a sort that would define and universalize

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teachers' rights to bargain collectively. And in the absence of such a body of principle, articulated and protected by a superordinate authority, the tendency has been, in those dramatic but relatively few instances where collective bargaining has been tried, to view it as an isolated

local phenomenon rather than an integral part of the national decision-making process that shapes educational policy, which is what it ought to be.

A third reason is the inexperience or occasionally the incompetence of negotiators to deal with anything other than bread-and-butter issues.

A fourth reason is the flat refusal of boards of education and administrations to consider non-economic items.

And, finally, the simple but understandable preoccupation of bargaining agents with job security and other threshold items has discouraged innovation at the bargaining table.

All these reasons help explain where we are now.

Don't misunderstand me. This doesn't mean that I'm against collective bargaining or that I think this is as far as we are going. Prior to the advent of collective bargaining, we teachers not only had no control over the educational environment within which we taught, we had little or no control over the personnel and salary policies under which we lived. Collective bar-

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gaining has at least given teachers a handle on that. But to infer greater control by teachers over the educational product because some benefits have been won through collective bargaining is, at present, either a minor conceit or a convenient excuse, depending on your perspective.

So the crucial question emerges: Can the collective bargaining process be adapted as a vehicle for improving the quality of education? Will Portia be able to face life in a new city? I think the answer is yes.

Thus far teacher power derived from collective bargaining has been the product of a

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relatively minor redistribution of some of the power which has drifted into the hands of school administrators over the past fifty years. In the popular mythology, decisions affecting educational policy are made by the people through an elected Board of Education. In my experience, the relative distribution of power between Boards of Education and Central Administrations has been analogous to that of the husband (the Board) making decisions affecting international relations, while the wife (Administration) considers the mundane matters of budget, child rearing, food, and so on. When myth replaces reality, nasty things happen. For example, the most difficult strikes to settle are those in which Administration surrenders its control to the elected Board, whose members are then thrown into a role for which they are totally unprepared. Reflect for a moment on the Los Angeles strike of 1970. In that confrontation Central Administration abdicated control to a hired gun who worked directly with the Board of Education. These policies had the effect of delaying settlement by at least three weeks.

For most of this century, the primary support for public education in this country has come from a loose alliance between the liberal establishment and the educational establishment. In recent years, this support has eroded; there has been a perceptible drift within the liberal establishment. Massive disenchantment with the prevailing view of the 1960s, which saw public schools as an instrument of social reform, has broken up, and perhaps destroyed, the alliance. With the wisdom of hindsight it is possible now for some of us to acknowledge how invalid this view, this faith, this expectation really was. Decker Walker of Stanford said it eloquently in a recent article in *Center Magazine*[3]

> "Educational criticism is a hobby of idle men's sons, not a serious tool for social reform. Serious social reformers know that schools acknowledge[d] . . . the legitimacy of the labor movement once that legitimacy was established outside the school (and not before), as [they] spoke out against the injustices of slavery in textbooks *after* the KKK became socially unacceptable, as [they] rewrote history books to give a legitimate place to the Indians and blacks after this battle had been won in the public media."[4]

It may be, therefore, that our root failure to achieve a national education policy lies in a misperception of role. If so, it would seem to follow that the drafting of a coherent policy must begin with an acknowledgement: the primary purpose of public education is not to initiate social change but, rather, to secure social goals. And if this be true, the next and somewhat unnerving question is, "Where do we look now for broad-based popular support?"

In any event, what power teachers have newly acquired has had to be expended not on the larger cause of educational policy but on the simple but vital fight to hold onto their jobs. When a person is fighting to save his or her rice bowl, it's difficult to think of anything else. And, make no doubt about it, job security is the number one threat confronting the American teacher. During the halcyon years of the fifties and sixties, we saw a vast expansion in both the educational plant and in the number of teachers. By contrast, in the fall of '73, 307,000 teacher graduates were scrambling for 117,000 jobs.[5]

During the fifties and sixties, we observed, or were party to, or guilty of, some of the most uncontrolled growth that any social institution has experienced. I can remember listening to Dr. Arthur Corey, executive secretary emeritus of the California Teachers Association, pleading with the State Assembly in California not to lower its credentialling requirements, as each year Los Angeles would come in pleading that another 3,000 bodies were needed in the classrooms. The State Board of Certification would engage in ritual discussion, lower the require-

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ments, and Los Angeles would get its bodies. Whenever some brave soul brought up the question of what's going to happen when the population line levels out, or plateaus, the

response was: "Well, then we can begin addressing ourselves to the issue of class size."

Well, now the babies are gone and we've been presented with a magnificent opportunity to confront the class size issue and do something about it. But this opportunity has been lost in the shuffle and the problem now is popularly regarded as one of an over-supply of teachers. The class size statistics that were perceived as an emergency situation in the sixties are looked upon today as a reasonable norm when computing teacher supply and demand. Teacher demand in 1973, using NEA's Quality Criterion, should have been 826,000 positions rather than the 117,000 for whom jobs were actually available. That represents a short fall of 600,000 graduates.[6]

Thus I see, for the time being, the newly attained power of teachers being used in a battle for survival rather than in ways more productive for teachers, their students, and education as a whole.

The realistic hope for an improved quality of education lies in a reordering of national priorities. However this may ring like a cliche, reordering national priorities remains the only way we can make enough dollars available to break out of our present aimless and hopeless cycle. And how do we reorder national priorities? Through political action.

Recognizing this, the NEA has formed NEAPAC (the National Education Association Political Action Committee), for whose support the 1973 Representational Assembly voted to collect $1 a member. Need for political action is also what motivated NEA to join with AFSCME (the largest public employee union within AFL-CIO) and the National Treasury Employees Union in the Coalition of American

Public Employees. It is not insignificant, moreover, that one of the Coalition's first objectives is a federal law that would not only guarantee bargaining rights for teachers but provide institutional arrangements and a scope of bargaining that would legitimatize participation by teachers in the formation of educational policy.

We've pushed local property taxes just about as far as they can go—indeed, farther than most of us realize. An interesting result of one of the NEA surveys on educational finance was that the overwhelming number of respondents believed that the federal government should be paying for at least fifty percent of educational costs. When asked how much of the costs they thought the federal government was actually paying, they replied one third. Their shock in finding out that the federal government was, in fact, picking up only eight percent of the costs was both fascinating and dispiriting.

> "Just as teachers look to political power to provide adequate financing, so will teachers look to the collective bargaining process to effect educational change."

That money and quality are interrelated has led to a specious rebuttal: that what is needed is not more money but better ideas. The most prescient point in Galbraith's *New Industrial State* is that big ideas and big money go hand in hand. Without enormous capital investment, you simply don't have the base from which mass experimentation and product refinement can be carried out. Enrico Fermi may be the father of the atomic bomb, but the capital

investment to realize his concept into a production model was massive. Imagine a comparable effort with Piaget's ideas. The problems of translating a success in an individual classroom into a model which can be replicated in millions of classrooms is no less costly or complex than the problem of creating the ideal automobile in a cellar someplace and pushing it out on the production line at GM or Ford. In truth, the industrial product is far simpler.

Organized teacher power, translated into political clout, may be the only viable force which can shift the traditional base of financing public education and tap new sources of funds. This task is thoroughly sexless and will never be a source of popular appeal. But organized teachers are prepared to fight the endless battle to produce adequate financing for education. They have no alternative.

As this fight to adequately finance education moves to the Congress, the alliances that won the property tax battles come under great stress. The air in Washington is thinner and harsher. Many friends of yesterday now view education funding as competing with their more immediate goals of environmental protection or health care, or worse, as sustaining a bankrupt concept. Teacher power is the only sus-

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taining force to which the education community can look, after the sunshine soldiers have departed.

But anyone who thinks that teacher power can be used in the Congress and frozen out of the classroom is wrong. The commitment of teachers to support adequate financing is not the same as a commitment to support the present system of public education. Just as teachers look to political power to provide adequate financing, so will teachers look to the collective bargaining process to effect educational change.

Teacher power as a political force and teacher power through the potential of collective bargaining may very well be the salvation of America's unique cultural contribution: the free public school.

NOTES

1. Wise, Helen. *A Federal Bargaining Act for State and Local Employees: Testimony in Support of H. R. 8677* (private publication of the Coalition of American Public Employees) p. 26.
2. *Government Employee Relations Report*, June 24, 1974, Number 560, p. B-1.
3. Weber, Arnold R. *The Federal Dragon and the State Knights: The Role of Federal Law in Public Sector Bargaining*, March, 1974, p. 8.
4. Walker, Decker. "Educational Policy is Flapping in the Wind," *Center Magazine*, February, 1974, p. 25.
5. *Teacher Supply and Demand in Public Schools, 1973*. NEA Research, Washington, D. C., p. 34.
6. *Ibid.*

RALPH J. FLYNN, a native of Boston and a onetime school teacher, left the classroom in 1962 to become a field man for the Connecticut Education Association. He joined the National Education Association two years later as New England urban field representative and subsequently served in California as executive director of the San Francisco Classroom Teachers Association and in Washington, D. C., as director for affiliate services, NEA. He was named executive director of the Coalition of American Public Employees shortly after its founding in 1972.

The Coalition has a membership through its constituent organizations of 2.4 million public employees in all 50 states. These organizations are also the collective bargaining representatives of about four million public employees.